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ABSTRACT

This paper describes some of the characteristics of Mexican-American culture and an attempt is made to show how these characteristics should be reflected in preschools for Mexican Americans. Three main areas are examined: (1) social and religious values; (2) individual and family relationships; and (3) the physical environment. Some suggestions for preschool programs include a year-round school, extended daily hours, voluntary attendance, neighborhood locations, and flexible program scheduling. It is emphasized that preschools for Mexican-Americans must be designed within the Mexican-American cultural framework. (CS)

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PRESCHOOLS FOR MEXICAN AMERICANS: Some Required Characteristics

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PRESCHOOLS FOR MEXICAN AMERICANS: Some Required Characteristics

The critical nature of the early years has been clearly shown through the works of Bloom (1964), Hunt (1968), and Bruner (1971). The unavoidable implication of this and similar research is that since such a great portion of each child's potential is set by the experiences of early childhood, preschools are important to the education of all children and are an absolute necessity to equal educational opportunity for disadvantaged youth. For advantaged youth their environment may compensate for any lack of formal education, but such is not the case for the disadvantaged.

Mexican Americans, a group even more disadvantaged than blacks,[1] encounter most of the same obstacles experienced by the majority disadvantaged group plus the additional handicap of often speaking a foreign language. Hence, Mexican Americans face three general educational handicaps: their unique problem of language, the problem of self-image and the problems wrought directly by a culturally disadvantaged environment.

Much attention has already been given to the confirmation of these points in the literature. The space available here will go the next steps beyond, first discussing the characteristics of the Mexican-American family and culture, and second describing how these characteristics should be reflected in preschools for Mexican Americans.

An understanding of these characteristics is crucial because present Mexican-American preschools largely disregard such characteristics; they are almost exclusively Anglo institutions. The greatest obstacle to successful preschool programs for Mexican Americans is the attitude held

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[1] Mexican Americans trail blacks in mean incomes, median years of schooling completed language achievement, etc. About the only statistic higher for Mexican American is the dropout rate. "Educating the Urban Disadvantaged," Committee for Economic Development, New York, March, 1971.

by many Anglo-American educators that their goals, values, and attitudes are or should be shared by Mexican Americans.

Thus, in meeting the purposes of this paper it will be necessary to examine and draw connections of three general Mexican-American cultural characteristics[1] to preschooling: social and religious values, individual and family relationships and the physical environment. Through this discussion the reader will perceive that several cultural traits of Mexican Americans often thought of as deterrents to education, are such only in terms of the Anglo method of instruction and school organization.

Social and Religious Values. Perhaps the social value posing educators the most difficulty is the Mexican American's view of destiny. The Chicano[2] enjoys the present mement to its fullest; he worries little about tomorrow. The future is uncertain; a being rather than doing orientation permeates his entire existence. To educators convinced of the value of achievement and the attainment of goals, the Mexican American's attitude is difficult to comprehend and accept.

To understand more fully the Mexican American's view of destiny, one must examine his religious beliefs. God is seen as the determiner of all actions and events. A fatalistic attitude toward life and oneself is evident. The individual is the passive counterpart in his relationship with God. If a child breaks a cup he may express himself by saying "It broke itself" rather than "I broke it". If some misfortune befalls him it is because it was already predestined to occur. Thus, he must not worry about tomorrow for what will happen, will happen, regardless of his

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[1] As in any group, there is great heterogeneity among Mexican Americans. This paper will baldly generalize in those areas where homogeneity is great.

[2] Spanish American, Mexican American, Mexican and Chicano are often used interchangeably in the literature even though the acceptance of these terms by Americans of Mexican descent varies greatly across the United States.

actions. The Mexican American is dedicated to living the moment to its fullest extent in the roles he finds assigned to him by God.

This fatalistic attitude poses problems to educators who hold that a child should be responsible for his own actions. In the Anglo school the child is given opportunities to and is encouraged to accept personal responsibility. But in any preschool program for Mexican Americans, teachers must understand the child's belief that "today is the most important thing" and they must also be willing to accept the child's attitude that the supreme being is the determiner of the child's actions. The problem of a being rather than doing orientation is a frustrating one to the typical Anglo teacher. Because a modification of teacher attitudes is required, this first trait is most difficult to reconcile with education.

The Mexican American's time orientation is such that preschool progarms should operate on a voluntary and full day basis as well as on a year round calendar. Operation Head Start originally functioned for half day sessions and only during the summer. It has been recognized, however, that the educational deficiences of disadvantaged children are so great that year round programs must be established. This is especially critical for the Mexican American since his time orientation is such that under the year round calendar if he does not want to go to school today, perhaps because something else seems more important, he can go to school tomorrow. Some educators, of course, would argue that this lack of structure and organization would lead to laxity and chaos. The overiding principle, however, is that the program must be run in terms of the Mexican-American value system, not in terms of the traditional Anglo system. For those educators who argue that Mexican Americans must learn to compete in an Anglo society, the answer is that one must learn to walk before he can

run. Disadvantaged pupils must first gain self-respect and a feeling of self-confidence through success under familiar conditions and with familiar objects before progressing to unfamiliar complex and abstract learnings (Leslie and Bigelow, 1971).

Pursuing the proposal of an extended school schedule, it would also be desirable for the school to be open on an all day basis rather than for half day sessions. The child should be free to come and go as he and his parents please. The question that may be raised immediately, however, is--What about specific knowledge to be gained? Are not schedules required for properly sequenced learning?

It is recommended that a totally flexible method of instruction be carried on throughout the day rather than there be designated times for language instruction, object identification, specific cognitive development activities, etc. This would also allow the teacher to work with children on an individual basis, an approach that is highly desirable for the Mexican-American child. The attitude that the moment is important must be reflected in the preschool schedule and curriculum.

A cultural feature of Mexican Americans harmonious with current preschool curricula, includes the Mexican American's disposition toward the arts. Mexican Americans have a deep fondness for and enjoy participating in drama and dance. The number and character of the festivals commemorated are witness enough to this trait. Closely tied to this affinity for drama and dance is the Mexican American's love for music. In addition, the bright, colorful costumes and handiwork reflect a cultural inclination toward visual aesthetics.

The arts should play a major part in a preschool curriculum. Mexican Americans find role playing and dramatizations to be enjoyable techniques, largely because they are non-directive. Festivities should be frequently

included as a part of the curriculum. The art and music abilities of Mexican Americans enhance enjoyment of this kind of activity. Capitialization upon the appeal of drama, dance, music and art to Mexican-American children is easily accomplished by educators. Most preschool and primary grades already make considerable use of these techniques.

Three other behavior patterns of Mexican American's bear mentioning. The first is that if a situation is unpleasant the Mexican-American child will retreat mentally or physically. Mexican-American children will not "rise to meet the challenge" as Anglo children often will. It should be realized that any program for Mexican Americans must appeal to them and be meaningful in terms of their own values.

Second, Mexican Americans consider material goods to be of relatively little value. This trait runs counter to a basic principle of motivation in American education--the use of material rewards to raise achievement, a technique which generally will not succeed with Mexican Americans. What will work, however, is a material reward that may be shared with friends. The Mexican American will not accumulate goods in order to be admired by his friends as is the case in Anglo society, but he will distribute goods to his friends to achieve the same esteem.

Third, Mexican Americans shun a direct approach in their relations with others. This implies that personal relationships established by the teacher must be achieved though informal, nondirect means. For example, information about family, home and past experiences must be sought using a nondirective approach.

Individual and Family Relationships. A look at the second category of cultural characteristics--individual and family relationships--reveals great strengths in Mexican-American culture but some obstacles to traditional Anglo education. To those even remotely familiar with Mexican Americans, it

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is readily apparent that the family unit is the single most important aspect of their lives. Each individual in the family performs his designated role: the father clearly heads his household and his masculinity is highly respected; the mother assumes her subservient role as wife and loving mother, having principal charge of caring for children under six and for the education of all girls; the sons are trained to assume their manly roles; and the daughters are dutiful, obedient and carefully protected by the father and older brothers.

Because of close family relationships, all family members, but especially the mother, should be involved in learning activities. Class visits to the homes of each child and sharing of audio visual recordings and filmings of the family would be productive modes for instruction. Indeed, it is imperative that Mexican-American mothers be drawn into the program on a voluntary, para-professional, intern or professional basis. While the assistance provided by the mother is greatly needed, the training and experience gained in the classroom by the mother is of immense value in her learning new approaches to working with her own children. She may also take the first steps in launching a new career. With this comes added self-respect and a more positive outlook toward the future.

While the Mexican-American father is away at work the mother is the unquestioned authority of the family and obedience is less likely to be enforced by physical punishment than by invoking maternal authority through expression of love and duty (Emondson, 1957). The problem of discipline then, can be dealt with effectively at an early age by a female using techniques similar to those used in the home.

While the closely knit structure of the Mexican-American family does

provide security for Mexican-American children, it also creates a contention and wariness among nuclear families and a mistrust for Anglos. To the educator bent upon doing group work, this bias poses a prohibitive barrier. The relationships outside the family are between one individual and another, rather than between an individual and a group.

Since Mexican Americans prefer individual-to-individual relationships rather than group relationships, the implication is for an individualized program and abundant opportunities for children to work with one another. Two children may paint together; two children may build together; two children may role play together. Their high degree of personalism can be extended eventually to all members of the class.

Because early in life the child learns that he must live in a threatening and hostile external world where the motives of others are open to suspicion, the challenge confronting the teacher is that of earning the confidence and trust of students. To reinforce and make preschool continuous with the child's family experience, teachers should be carefully selected. Teachers must be loving and tender, assuming somewhat the role of the mother in the Mexican-American household. It is suggested that full-time teachers be female while coordinators or supervisors be male--an organization not unlike the family structure.

Due to a general mistrust of Anglos by Mexican Americans it would be desirable for preschool centers to be located in the Mexican-American neighborhood, thus providing Mexican-American parents more contact with the school. As they become acquainted with the staff and facilities their mistrust can be overcome. This would also allow teachers to become acquainted with the community and it's unique characteristics.

Despite the attitude toward the external world, the tenderness and affection given Mexican-American children in their homes provides them with

a sense of security and stability. The child has a prescribed role in his family, has great loyalty to his family and is deeply loved. Mexican-American children experience these feelings in a way many Anglo children never enjoy. It is this great strength that must be capitalized upon in educating Mexican Americans.

The Physical Environment. A look now to the physical environment of the Mexican American. Whereas the previous two general characteristics required adjustment and understanding on the part of Anglo educators, it is in this last area that conditions must be altered.

The living conditions and poverty of Mexican Americans are similar to those of other minority groups and poor whites. The first and most important characteristic of their poverty is malnutrition. Knowlton (1971) describes the observable effects of this malnutrition:

> If he (any observer) were to stop by a group of mothers and children, he could easily determine the existence of malnutrition by observing the pallor noticeable even in the brown skins, the unhealthy skin and flesh tone, the listlessness, the puffiness, the anemia, and the lip sores. Disease is widespread. Unrecognized and untreated anemia, veneral disease, and tuberculosis shadow the classroom. Wave after wave of infectious diseases such as measles, mumps, and chicken pox pass through the Mexican American school population.

In addition to malnutrition and disease, a toothache is a familiar pain to the poverty-stricken Mexican American. "They regard it as one of the burdens to be endured by the poor. The nervous strain caused by toothache, pyorrhia and lack of normal dental development troubles the learning process of Mexican-American children "(Knowlton, 1971). Hunt (1966) elaborates on this obstacle to learning: "There is a hierarchy of motivational systems. Pain-avoidance dominates all others. Hunger, thirst and other

homostatic needs come next followed by sex, plans and finally information processing." Thus any preschool program for Mexican Americans must include adequate medical services and wide scale programs of nutrition to insure the child's optimal educational development.

Mexican-American children are generally considered to be past infancy when a younger sibling is born and they are then often left to their own devices to amuse themselves. They have a few toys but they seem to show less interest in them than Anglo children of the same age. Thus although stimulation in some form is needed, it would appear that it must come from some source external to the home. The implication here is for the classroom to contain a variety of activities and manipulatory objects.

Piaget sees the self-teaching of the child as essential to the learning process. Providing a variety of activities in preschool should enhance the attainment of Piaget's process of assimilation and accomodation for the Mexican-American child who is not apt to encounter diverse educational activities in his home. Whether Piaget's learning theory is universal and thus applicable to the Mexican, remains to be seen. It may be assumed, however, that the Mexican-American child acquires his time orientation and fatalistic attitude by socialization to his culture, and if the child were introduced to an activity oriented, self-teaching program at an early age, a modification of his orientation would assist him in making the transition to the formalized educational structure characteristic of Anglo society.

Discussion

By this statement no call for a change in Mexican-American values is intended. What is advocated is "cultural pluralism" by which the Mexican-American culture can co-exist within the Anglo society. Nevertheless, Mexican Americans must adapt to the extent necessary to gain success in a predominantly Anglo society.

The development of a common culture, which would include the best of both cultures and yet permit wide individual variation, is a reasonable goal.

Recognition of language as the basis for concept development in young children has led educators to examine language patterns in the home. Olin, Hess and Shipman's (1965) evidence points to the mother's language usage "as the mediating factor in the child's conceptual development rather than the child's IQ or the verbal IQ of the mother." Hess' (1965) results indicate that when mothers provide restrictive language codes the child's problem-solving ability is diminshed. Brussel (1971) relates this statement to Mexican Americans by stating that, "Although parents do not seem to be bothered by having children around, they talk very little to their small children except to answer questions or give instruction." Even then, however, the language spoken may deter from rather than facilitate functional learning. If the Mexican-American child were exposed at an early age to formalized Spanish and English instruction, he would have greater opportunities to develop the language skills necessary for concept formation and problem solving.

Summary

In summation, the following are suggested for preschool programs for Mexican Americans. Structure should involve a year round school, extended daily hours, voluntary attendance, neighborhood locations and flexible scheduling. Curriculum should include English and Spanish instruction, learning and leisure activities focused upon the family of each child and activities designed especially for cognitive development. The classroom environment should consist of a variety of manipulatory objects, numerous interest centers, role playing and dramatization facilities, audio visual equipment, rest areas, art centers, music centers and building centers. The method of instruction should be individualized language instruction, individualized

cognitive development activities and instruction through partnership relations. Staff should be female teachers, Mexican-American mothers as aides, and a male supervisor. Supplementary service should include meals, medical and dental support.

Throughout this paper the emphasis has been upon generalizations of the Mexican-American culture, bearing in mind that there are great differences between and within rural, urban and migratory Mexican-American groups. Thus, any preschool program would have to make adaptations of the above suggestions according to the particular preschool population. In any case, however, it should be understood that preschools for Mexican Americans must be designed within the Mexican-American cultural framework.

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